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The Picture Novel Arrives in America

Dr. H. Lehmann-Haupt
of the Gutenberg Museum, Mainz

AT psychological moments certain things, which may have existed before, ripen and become evident to a wide public. Thus a number of years ago, in Europe, picture novels suddenly sprung up and took an acknowledged place among their more eloquent cousins, the ordinary reading novels. The revival of the woodcut, always a democratic means of appeal to the crowd, is by now an almost overstated fact. The picture novel, this interesting new child in the book family, is largely dependent upon the simplified development of black and white expression which the last thirty years have brought about. But there is another parent, which, I believe, is largely responsible for our quick and full appreciation of the striking new product.

For all the time, while we turn from page to page to "read" the story and enjoy the thrill of a hitherto unknown way of attack upon our attention, we experience also the pleasant feeling of meeting something very familiar and friendly, without knowing exactly why. Then we realize, that it is nothing but the association with our impressions in the moving picture theater. Only, the pleasure is more subtle, for we are alone in this theater and audience and operator are one person. We can make the story run quickly, we can even skip, but we can also stop altogether. Then suddenly it is not so much a piece

out of a story that counts, but an individual picture with its own particular qualities. This is where the superiority of the picture novel comes in.

But it must be remembered that the medium itself does not make a picture-novelist, any more than the ability to write prose makes the prose-novelist. There will possibly be many books of this type produced which do not convince.

The flood has now reached America. Only a short while ago "Gods' Man" (*Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith*), the young Lynd Ward's first essay in the black art, created much comment and interest as the first American picture novel. Here is a young designer, who makes a fresh and hearty start in the new field. He does not bind himself to any par-



A scene from Otto Nückel's "Destiny," a German picture novel soon to be brought out by Farrar & Rinehart

ticular style of expression, and prefers to use all the possibilities of the woodcut technique. Heavy contrasts of dense black areas and open wide spaces emphasize the dramatic highlights of his story, while the more descriptive parts are reflected in a refined play of detailed and even rather delicate lines.

The story itself tells us the experiences of a young painter, who enters life with a fair amount of naive trust in the ways of the world. He encounters disappointments and consolation, only to face the final disillusionment of death. Though the scenery contains many elements of the

modern world, there is a strong fantastic tendency, a symbolizing fairy-tale atmosphere about it. This idea of a phantastic and symbolizing account of modern life has occasionally been employed by Frans Masereel, the Flemish woodcutter, in some of his work. Recently, however, a somewhat altered content has been put into the frame of a picture novel, telling the story not by symbolizing, but by using as raw material, so to speak, many single "Snap shots," photographed from life, every single picture in itself a true reflex of the outer appearance of the world. An effect somewhat comparable on the dramatic stage with the strong and direct appeal of a play like "Street Scene," has been the result.

This is the case with the German artist Otto Nückel's "Destiny," which Farrar & Rinehart are about to bring out. "Destiny" was published only a short while ago in Germany, but there has been nothing quite like it ever done in that country.

Of course Masereel's picture novels were the first to be published abroad. He has said his say with an unmistakably Flemish accent, and the black and white style of his unpretentious and simple scenes is

full of vivid and strong contrast. Compared with the more gracious, more friendly and elegant products of modern English wood cutting, Masereel's work looks like an old Breughel in front of a Holbein. Nowhere can we find modern

life with all its manifold and colorful aspects pictured in a more simple and convincing technique than in Masereel's woodcuts. He is now about forty years old and the sum of his work displays astonishing richness. His woodcuts and drawings taken together amount to several thousand. Only a few people know his paintings and watercolor sketches. He became first known to the wider European public as an illustrator of authors like Verhaeren, Romain Rolland, Jouve, Duhamel, Stern-

heim and especially Charles-Louis Philippe. As the interpreter of other people's books he developed his sense for condensing action and situations into pictured scenes to an instrument of high perfection.

In 1918, under the influence of the Middle European Revolution he created his "Human Passion," 25 scenes without words, still in his loose, picturesque earlier manner. Later on he developed the particular

O. Nückel SCHICKSAL Eine Geschichte in Bildern



DELPHIN VERLAG MÜNCHEN



*The title-page of the German edition of
"Destiny"*



*From Frans Masereel's
"Das Werk"*



*From Frans Masereel's
"Die Sonne"*

pregnancy and formula abbreviation of scene, which enabled him to produce under the appearance of a more or less primitive silhouette his own typical world of impressions and sentiments. He designed his great picture novels of 60-80 scenes, called "The Sun," "The Idea," "Story without Pictures," "My Book of Hours," "The Creation." These books have in Germany been brought into people's hands by large popular editions at moderate prices, produced by the well-known Munich publisher, Kurt Wolff, and have established the popularity of picture novels and many of them have recently been imported and sold in America.

Nückel's "Destiny" is in a class by itself. The book tells a story, which may be called typical for our age of industrialism, and which might happen any day in any big town. It is the story of a workman: poor childhood, early death of the parents, toil and struggle for the daily bread. A chain of poverty and neglect with only a scarce glimpse of hope and relief. There is no propaganda, no sentimentality, only the constant weight of realism, saying: "Yes, so it is!"

However, instead of depressing by their

gloomy atmosphere, these unpretentious pictures produce more than anything else a purifying effect of strange intensity. We cannot help acknowledging the superior quality of an artist, who not only fearlessly looks into the heart of things, but knows also how to name them in his own language, and to produce that constant stream of compressed and typical action which delights with its precise logic and convinces us with the weight of unavoidable fate.

Nückel has worked at his novels for five years; it is the crystalization of a long and slow process of creation, a product of maturity and perfection. For this reason, and because the medium in which he expresses himself is new, the pictures produce a direct effect. Otto Nückel cuts his stories on lead, a material never used before for pictorial purposes. He took to it in the days of war, when there was no proper wood available in Germany,

and he has become so familiar with it that he has never gone back to wood. His single prints, not included through lack of space in the reproductions illustrating this article, show the same uncompromising quality, and loveliness, which delights us in the 206 pages of "Destiny."



Lynd Ward's "Gods' Man," (Cape & Smith.) Heavy contrasts of black and white areas emphasize the dramatic highlights of the story